

**Academic Mentoring as Precarious Practice**  
Alan Mandell & Xenia Coulter  
SUNY Empire State College

**Extended Abstract**

On the occasion of the publication of the book, *Mentoring in Formal and Informal Contexts* (edited by Kathy Peno, Elaine Silva Mangiante, and Rita Kenahan), the authors of each chapter were asked to describe and discuss their particular subject area at the AHEA (2016) conference. In our presentation, we explained that our chapter, “Academic Mentoring as Precarious Practice,” particularly as applied to adult learners, is organized into three sections.

**Keywords:** Adult learners, Mentoring, Student-centered learning, Student-centered mentoring

In the first, we take up the definition of mentoring. Key here is the recognition that “mentoring” is understood differently depending upon the particular contexts in which it takes place (e.g. mentoring designed to help a new employee learn the ropes of a corporation is different from mentoring in an academic context that seeks to promote open-ended intellectual student growth). Second, we offer numerous examples in which we illustrate factors and conditions that challenge the effectiveness and sustainability of productive mentoring (e.g., the tension between a mentor’s need to nurture students’ intellectual interests and a mentor’s urge to “direct” those interest in conventional directions institutional hierarchies that make unbridgeable the apparent distance between the academic expertise of the mentor and worldly knowledge of the mentee).

And third, our discussion takes up many unanswered (and perhaps unanswerable) questions associated with mentoring in an academic setting (e.g., questions that arise about the relationship of mentor and mentee at the micro-level, and those that pertain to the relationship between everyday

mentoring practices and the structures, policies and procedures of the institution in which those practices take place—i.e., at the macro-level). At the conference, we invited the audience to share specific instances—or cases—in which they, as academic mentors, face (or have faced) complex dilemmas with their individual mentees and also with their college institutions. Throughout the conversation, questions were raised about the scalability of academic mentoring, particularly within the confines of traditional institutions, along with issues about the meaning (and sustainability) of the concept of student-centeredness. We also sought to show that the very practice of mentoring exposes significant academic issues that can transcend any particular teaching methodology (i.e., about the very definition of who knows what and what exactly students do or should learn in college).

In effect, our chapter and subsequent discussion raises three major questions: First, how do faculty grapple with the tensions and problems associated with academic mentoring? Second, what actions can we take as adult educators that might put mentoring on a less precarious and more secure footing? And finally, is there any hope for this significant tradition of teaching with a strong student-centered focus, especially given the significant pressures that, particularly in the last decades, have thinned out its core?